



Gangai Amman

The goddess of the river Ganges is known as Gangai Amman, and she and the river are worshipped as one. The river plays an integral role in the lives of the millions of Hindus in India. Gangai Amman's myths, forms of worship, usage in daily rituals, and faith in her power all have an extremely important place in Hinduism today.

Many myths describe Gangai Amman as having heavenly origins, and illustrate her descent (avatarana) to earth in various ways, all involving association with the important male gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Namaha Shiva. In one account, Gangai Amman descends to earth using Namaha Shiva to break her fall. As she falls through his hair, she becomes divided into many streams, each flowing to a different part of the earth. She does this in order to wash over the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of King Sagara, in order to purify and free their souls. His sons had deeply offended the great sage Kapila, who, in anger, burned them to ash. Eventually, Bhagiratha, a descendent of Sagara, takes upon himself to free the souls of his ancestors by doing many austerities. After centuries of doing this, Gangai Amman appears and grants his wish and goes to earth.

Another variety of the myth describes that the god Brahma, who, holding Gangai Amman in his water pot, pours her onto Vishnu's foot when it stretches into the heavens. The three parts of the Ganges have their own names. The section remaining in heaven is known as Mandakini. The earthly portion is known as Gangai Amman, and the part that goes to the final region is called Bhagirathi. All accounts of the myth stress the importance of Gangai Amman's heavenly, divine nature, and of being made sacred by coming into contact with Vishnu and Namaha Shiva. Due to Gangai Amman's descent from heaven to earth, she becomes a continuous link between the earthly and heavenly realms. It is because of this link that the Ganges is so revered as a way to be in closer contact with the divine.

As Gangai Amman is personified in the form of water, by Penance and Worship to Gangai Amman, your sins and bad karmic actions will be washed away by bathing in this divine Water. Gangai Amman not only cleanses the body externally but also internally. After a puja and bathing in the holi water you emerge fresh, energetic and positive. Gangai Amman is related in the myths to various deities, but it is the relationship between Gangai Amman and Namaha Shiva that is the most emphasized. Both are dependent on each other. It is only Gangai Amman who can cool the Temper of Namaha Shiva; otherwise he would always be as a burning ball of fire, and it only with Namaha Shiva's help that Gangai Amman does not flood the earth. Both are vehicles for each other. This relationship is demonstrated through the daily ritual of pouring water over the Namaha Shiva linga.

When depicted in different art forms, Gangai Amman is shown as a fair complexioned woman, wearing a white crown and sitting on a crocodile. Many deities are depicted holding special objects, and Gangai Amman is no exception. When shown with two hands, she holds a water lily and a lute. If having four hands, she carries a water lily, a water pot, a rosary, and one hand is held in a protective position. Poet seers of the Vedas started the



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tradition of praising Gangai Amman for her blessings and power centuries ago. Many praises (mahatmyas) of Gangai Amman can be read in various Sanskrit epics and Puranas, and there are also numerous hymns devoted to the goddess, one of which is known as Jagannatha's "Gangai Amman Lahari." These praises and hymns emphasize her greatness, glory, and life giving waters. Different levels of protection and help is also said to be achieved through certain actions involving Gangai Amman. For example, chanting Gangai Amman's name alone is believed to reduce poverty or get rid of bad dreams. Bathing in Gangai Amman's waters or being cremated on her banks can even result in liberation (Moksa).

Since the river is such a major physical feature and is so important in Hindu mythology, it is only natural that it has major significance in people's daily lives and rituals. One such role is that played in death rituals. Many Hindus want their ashes or bones put into the Ganges, because they believe that in doing so, they are guaranteed a safe journey to the ancestral realm. It is believed that one can receive liberation immediately through contact with the Ganges. This can occur either by dying in the Ganges, or simply having its water put on the lips right before death. The link that Gangai Amman provides to the heavens from earth is once again observed in the belief that when one's ashes touch the waters, they are rejuvenated and strengthened enough to make the journey to heaven. If one is particularly devout, he or she will try to spend their last days on the banks of the river. They do this according to the belief that one who dies there will be delivered from all sins. These actions strongly support the belief that the Ganges has the power to provide deep spiritual cleansing.

This characteristic of being caring points to another major faith in Gangai Amman, which is her portrayal of being motherly and loving. She is commonly known as Mother Ganges. As Mother, she has the powers of compassion and comfort, and is a provider of blessings to her children. Her motherly care can lead to a place that is free from sorrow, fear, old age and death. The goddess is also said to be aware of everyone's deepest fears and desires. Gangai Amman takes these feelings upon herself, leaving the individual purified and strengthened. Everyday, millions bathe in and drink from the river, and pray on its banks. Using the water for washing, bathing, and cooking is a way to make sure one can receive Gangai Amman's blessings and grace. Gangai Amman's waters are understood to be the life giving, immortal liquid (Amrita) of mother's milk. The waters are life giving, both physically and spiritually. Physically, the river gives life to the land, making it fertile. The Ganges can create and support life, and is often appealed to in order to ensure healthy crops. Spiritually, the water can purify and cleanse one of pollution. Flowing water has cleansing capabilities, and the power to get rid of one's daily impurities. This can be done by simply pouring water over one's head, or taking a ritual bath. These methods are often approved as a way to remove pollution. In these ways, Gangai Amman fulfills the role of universal mother, protector, and purifier.

The Ganges River can be viewed as an embodiment of life, purity, and power. From its use in daily tasks to more spiritual applications, the Ganges maintains its place as a dominant entity in Hinduism. In recent years, pilgrimage to Gangai Amman has become more popular. Gangai Amman is a very powerful force, and she is the link between nature, humans, and divinity. Respect and adoration for physical nature is reflected in the

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spiritual importance given to the sacred river and the general landscape. Gangai Amman is proclaimed to be the most supreme and she is present in every river, and all agree that her power is unending and divine.

Many other Pujas, worshipping Kali Amma can be learnt. Shree Kali Amman Mandir hosts many such festivals, glorifying and worshipping Kali Amma throughout the year. Follow www.skam.co.za or Shree Kali Amman Mandir FB Page. –Guru Prakash Diar

Vazhga Kali Amma Vazgha



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